



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

XIV.—*British Superstitions as to Hares, Geese, and Poultry.*

By J. THRUPP, Esq.

[Read April 24th, 1866.]

CÆSAR tells us that there were three animals which the Ancient Britons bred from inclination and for amusement, but which they thought it a crime to eat, viz., the goose, the hare, and the fowl.\*

This feeling existed extensively in Europe; but was probably abandoned at an earlier date by the southern than by the northern nations, and by the south Saxons sooner than by the Britons.

It was the child of superstition. The religion of savages is often nothing but a vague belief in the supernatural. Every extraordinary quality, whether in a chalybeate spring, a medicinal herb, or in the instinct of an animal, is deemed miraculous and venerated with fear.

This may account for what Cæsar tells us of the goose. It was supposed to possess marvellous longevity, and to live eighty years;† and it was justly famous for the acuteness of its hearing and smell. A mouse could not stir without its hearing it, and it could scent a man at a greater distance than any other animal.‡ It discovered St. Martin when he had concealed himself to give practical effect to his “*nolo episcopari*,” and, as a reward, was, and is, systematically eaten at Martinmas over the greater part of Europe; though, when in England the autumnal rent-day was transferred to Michaelmas, the goose was transferred also.§ It was supposed to study the stars, and astrology, and to be weather-wise.||

The Egyptians regarded it as sacred to Isis; but they had for gods so many beasts, and birds, that had they not sometimes eaten them they must have starved.

To the Romans, the goose was the symbol of vigilance. It was employed in every petty village, if not in every humble house, in

\* Cæsar de Bell. Gall., lib. v, c. 12.

† Migne, Nouvelle Encyclopédie.

‡ A. Neckam, De Naturis Rerum, p. 117.

§ Molesworth's Denmark, p. 10; Brande's Pop. Ant., vol. i, p. 368;

“Altera Martinus dein Bacchanalia præbet,

Quem colit anseribus populus multoque Lycæo.”

Thomas Neogeorgius, De Regno Pontif.; Clavis Calend., p. 266.

|| Brande's Pop. Antiq., p. 217.

lieu of a house-dog;\* and, in discharge of its duty, is fabled to have saved the capitol. It was reared with religious care in the Temple of Janus, and was not until the time of Cæsar generally eaten. Under the emperors, geese became a most fashionable article of luxury, and fetched an enormous price.†

The Northmen had a superstitious dislike of eating geese. In the eighth century some brethren visited St. Cuthbert in his storm-girt isle, and were there detained by weather. St. Cuthbert offered them food, saying, "When you have cooked and eaten the goose which is hanging on the wall, get into your vessel, and, with God's blessing, return home." They would not touch the goose, put to sea, and were driven back. On their return, the saint exclaimed, "You have left the goose hanging in his place: why wonder at the storm? Put the goose in the cauldron, boil and eat it, and the sea shall then be calmed." They did as they were bid; and the moment the kettle boiled, the winds and the waves were stilled. The voyagers departed possibly more surprised that the saint should eat a goose than still a tempest.‡ The goose was, at first, but semi-domesticated; and, being a great plunderer of corn-fields, was severely dealt with.§

By the law of Wales, animals which trespassed might be re-deemed; but the goose was to be slain; and its owner, though responsible for his other animals, was not so for it. If cattle, for instance, broke a fishing-net in river or sea, the owner was responsible; but if his geese did it, he was not; for, says the law, "the geese and the nets are equally senseless;" and, as it is impossible to say which is to blame, neither pays damages.||

In Wales geese could not be tendered in payment of rent or fines, for centuries after they might have been so in England; nor were they payable for the support of foster-children, though among the south Saxons they formed a considerable portion of the compulsory allowance for that purpose.¶

But the superstition which prevented the domestication of the goose yielded to the love of gain, and geese became regular articles of commerce. The luxury of Imperial Rome demanded the "*pinguibus et ficiis pastum jecur anseris*;" and to the delicious *pâté de foie-gras*, which was in Rome served up in wine and milk, we owe a step forward in economic civilisation.

The Celts, Gauls and Franks, tempted by profit, abandoned

\* *Unicus anser erat minimæ custodia villæ.*—*Ovid.*

† Migne, *Nouvelle Encyclopédie.*

‡ *Bedæ Vita Sanct. Cuthberti*, c. xxxvi.

§ Michelet, *Origines du Droit Français*, p. 198.

|| *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales*, vol. ii, pp. 813, 873, and 906.

¶ *Ll. Inæ, Anc. Laws and Inst.*, vol. i, p. 147.

their hatred of geese, and reared them in enormous numbers for the Sardanapalian feasts of Italy.\* Anseria (or goose folds) were established in Northern Europe, whence geese (the tired ones foremost) were driven across the Alps. Under Ludovicus Pius these "anseria" were taxed in aid of royal or seignorial revenue.† When it became profitable to breed and export geese, their unpopularity ceased; and in *that*, as in a hundred other instances, commerce slew a superstition.

*The hare*, the second animal mentioned by Cæsar, was in many lands the object of superstitious fancies, all of which were the children of ignorance. The Jews pronounced it unclean for chewing the cud, of which it was physically incapable;‡ and Mahomet followed in their wake. The probable ground of condemnation was, that hares, in Syria and Arabia, were very scarce and very unwholesome.

The northern nations, among whom hares were more plentiful, were not less unjust. It was regarded as the familiar of wizards and witches, who adopted its form, and in compensation bestowed on it magical powers. It was accused of supernatural restlessness, possibly because it wanders great distances in search of its mate; and was supposed never to sleep, probably, because it sleeps with its eyes open, and wakes at the slightest sound.§

The Welsh, at a comparatively late period, held the hare valueless, because, as their law asserts, "it was alternate months male and female;|| and the English, even after the Norman conquest, believed it to be of both sexes at once.¶ This, again, may have arisen from male and female hares being rarely seen together, and from their change of colour in winter and summer in northern climates.

The hare was considered an animal of evil omen.\*\* If it crossed a labourer's path when the latter was going out to work, he would return home and start anew.†† Nor was he singular in this; for it was customary from the time when Cyrus marched against Armenia to that of Sir Thomas Browne. The former would have abandoned his intended invasion if an eagle had not

\* Pliny, Hist. Nat., lib. x, c. 27.

† Du Cange, Nov. Gloss, p. 222; Ll. Ludovici Pii, "Francorum à quolibet habente anseriam, unum anserem haberet," etc.

‡ Levit., c. xi, v. 6; Deut., c. xiv, v. 7.

§ Migne, Nouvelle Encyclopédie, p. 939.

|| Guentian Code, c. xxiii, s. 7.

¶ Alex. Neckam, De Naturis Rerum, p. 215.

\*\* Brande's Popular Antiq., vol. iii, p. 201.

†† "Lepus quoque occurrens in via infortunatum iter præagat et ominosum."—*Alex. ab Alexdro.* lib. v, c. 13.

carried off the ill-omened hare ; and the latter believed that no man of grave years could see it cross his path without fear.\*

In Wales it was not hunted at the time of Howell the Good, for there were no harriers in his days.† The fox and the hare were counted as wild beasts, and with the roebuck denounced as vermin ;‡ but as in the portion of Britain, which was occupied by the Romans, the bones of hares have been found, it is not improbable that Roman luxury bought off a national prejudice. The first we hear of the hare being chased in Anglo-Saxon times is in a scolding given to his pupils by Alcuin for running after them, when they ought to have been learning their lessons or sayings their prayers.§ It was probably in the tenth century that they were first hunted for profit in southern England. The professional huntsman, in Archbishop Alfric's colloquy, enumerates the animals he hunted for gain, and finishes with (*aliquando lepores*) *sometimes* hares.|| It is curious that, in contravention of the Mosaic law, the clergy should have urged the eating of them, nominally because they cured dysentery and diarrhoea ; but more probably because they had discovered the art of converting their fur into an artificial beaver or ermine, which was then extensively used in ecclesiastical costume.¶ Shortly before the Norman conquest they were hawked for with falcons, but probably rather for sport than food.\*\*

The domestication of the hare was wisely despaired of. He was formally doomed to destruction at the same time as the fierce wolf, the astute fox, and the gallant otter ; but while these have barely escaped annihilation, the defenceless hare prospers. The superstition against it has ceased, and if it was once unlucky for a farm labourer that a hare should cross his path, the ill luck would probably now be on the side of the hare.

*The cock* is the third animal reared by the ancient Britons, which they thought it wicked to eat. This also may have arisen from superstition. The cock was a native of Central Asia, whence it passed into Persia, over which country (according to Aristophanes) it reigned supreme prior to Darius and Megabazus.

\* Vulgar Errors, b. v, c. 23.

† Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales, vol. i, p. 500.

‡ Demetian Code, c. xiii, s. 19.

§ William of Malmesbury, b. i, c. 3.

|| Arch. Alfric's Colloq., p. 4.

¶ Theodore, Arch. Cant. Lib. Pœnit., c. xxx, s. 13; Ecberti Arch., Ebor., c. 38. It came to be used by the clergy so extensively as to damage the trade in all other furs. Its use was therefore forbidden by the Arrêt du Conseil du 10 Août 1700. The Russian hares were quite white, and highly valued.—*Encyclopédie Méthodique*, tom. iii, p. 31.

\*\* Alex. Neckam, De Naturis Rerum, p. 25.

From Persia it probably found its way into Greece, and thence through Rome to France and Britain.\*

In all these countries it was regarded superstitiously. In Persia it was used for the purpose of divination, as it was afterwards by the Greeks and Romans. It was a cock that assured Themistocles of his victory over Xerxes, influenced the decision of Romulus in choosing the site of Rome, and inspired Numa Pompilius.

It is probable that with the bird arrived in England the superstitions which enshrouded it, and to these others were freely added. The most fanciful and important was that it fed on human blood and flesh; and one, hardly less important, that the cock in its old age laid eggs, which, hatched by toads, produced the cockatrice.†

Our ancestors had the greatest horror of eating blood or any animal that fed on it; and their half-naked wanderings in their pathless forests gave them a still more intense hatred of adders.‡ This may, in part, account for the feeling with which the cock was received.

The first objection to it (that of feeding on blood) seems to have slowly yielded to the persuasion of the Christian clergy, who required capons and innumerable eggs for their frequent fasts. Theodore of Canterbury taught that even had the bird been guilty of tasting blood, it might be eaten after being sprinkled with holy water; but his great disciple in the See of York, followed him with trembling steps, and said that such fowls might only be eaten after three months' probation, and seems subsequently to have repented this his too liberal opinion, and ordered them to be killed and given to the dogs. No Christian man was to taste the blood of fowl or cattle, nor of any animal which fed on blood.§

It is possible that the pugnacity of the cock might have rendered it a favourite with warlike barbarians, and that it was kept for fun, or, to borrow Cæsar's words, "*animi voluptatisque causa*"; and that, even before the time that the Romans made cockfighting a popular amusement in England.

To what exact date we may refer the cessation of the prejudice against eating poultry is unknown; but they were favourite food in the seventh century, and constantly increased in favour, both with rich and poor. A cock or hen was thought an acceptable present from a serf to his lord, particularly on rent day (when pos-

\* Rees's Encyclop., v. Phasiniadæ.

† Alex. Neckam, *De Naturis Rerum*, p. 392.

‡ Riht is that ænig Xisten mon blod ne thycge.—*Soames*, p. 252.

§ *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, vol. ii, 165, 167.

sibly punctuality in payment had not been too severely observed), and it was as systematically offered at Christmas or Lady Day as the goose at Martinmas.

The parties giving them piqued themselves on the beauty of the birds.\* As every present made at fixed dates became in feudal times compulsory, we find poultry claimed as a species of rent, and afterwards their payment constantly reserved in grants in evidence of feudal superiority. But, as a rule, the burghers would not yield them, and when a serf became a burgher, his so doing was sometimes expressed by the phrase, "his chickens no longer fly over the wall."† In the middle ages they were most extensively bred in every country place. In the course of a few centuries the merits of the cock lived down the ill fame it brought to England with it, and it rose to the popularity it has ever since maintained.

\* "Rouge comme un coq de redévance."

† Michelet, *Origines du Droit Français*, t. xi, p. 74.